

## A Review on the Herbs Combination for Phlegm Disease Treatment according to Dan Xi Xin Fa

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### Abstract

Zhu Dan Xi 朱丹溪 was considered one of the greatest scholar in Jin-Yuan dynasty. One of his outstanding therapeutic principle is in the treatment of phlegm diseases. Zhu Dan Xi's therapeutic principle in treating phlegm disease can be learned by analyzing the statistical data of the herbs' medicinal characteristic and herbs' combination, as stated in *Dan Xi Xin Fa* [丹溪心法]. Results regarding the usage of herbs and their medicinal characteristics were systematically recorded in *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* as well [神农本草经]. In this paper, the principle of treating phlegmatic syndrome according to the experience of Zhu Dan Xi is discussed. The principle of treating *qi* in order to cure phlegmatic syndrome is focused. The herbs with acrid and bitter tastes were used by him to cure the disease. By combination of these two types of herbs, *qi* can be regulated thorough the body. The movement of *qi* will help in curing the diseases.

### Keywords

Therapeutic principle, phlegm disease, combination of herbs

### Introduction

Zhu Dan Xi, was one of the “four great scholars” in Jin-Yuan dynasty. Zhu Dan Xi is famous by his theory of *yin* nourishment, and thus the later generation refer him as the founder of ‘the school of *yin* nourishment’. Zhu Dan Xi proposed several ideas in various aspects. His therapeutic principle in treating phlegm diseases is used until today.

Prior to Jin-Yuan dynasty, phlegm was usually dispelled through emetic medicinal method, purgation method, and warming method. However, Zhu Dan Xi suggested that “The phlegm disease shall be treated through the regulation of *qi*. Once the *qi* movement is smooth, the body fluid circulation will be smooth, and the phlegm will be removed” (Zhu, 2006).

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### Definition of Phlegm from Chinese Medicine Perspective

The phrase ‘phlegm’ was firstly recorded in *Synopsis of Golden Chamber · Chapter 12 Therapeutic Principle on Phlegmatic Fluid Cough Disease*. Phlegm is the pathological product which formed due to the obstruction of body fluid metabolism, leading to failure of body fluid to circulate accordingly (Fan, 2002). There are several factors leading to phlegmatic syndrome. Externally, it may occur due to the invasion of pathogenic factors into body. While internally, phlegm may be generated due to injury or diet.

The phrase “phlegm” wasn’t mentioned in *Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine · Simple Question · Zhi Zhen Yao Da Lun*. Dampness syndrome, swelling syndrome and bloat syndrome, are related to dysfunction of spleen (Yellow Emperor’s Canon of Medicine, 2005). The pathogen related phlegmatic syndrome is closely related to damp syndrome. Phlegm is generated in spleen, while lung is where phlegm accumulated. Affected by pathogenic condition, spleen might fail to carry out the functions in transportation and transformation of *qi*, while lung might fail in dispersion and descending *qi*. Consequently, bladder may fail to control normal urination. Then, the stagnated fluid would be transformed into phlegm.

According to *Dan Xi Xin Fa: Chapter 13 Phlegm*, phlegmatic syndromes can be classified into five, namely the phlegmatic syndrome due to dampness, the phlegmatic syndrome due to heat, the phlegmatic syndrome due to indigestion, the phlegmatic syndrome due to pathogenic wind, and the phlegmatic syndrome over a long period of time. The definition of each syndrome is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Phlegmatic syndromes

Syndrome	Definition
phlegmatic syndrome due to dampness	The invasion of dampness pathogens or generation of dampness indogenously which leads to the accumulation of fluid, qi stagnation and resulting phlegm formation
phlegmatic syndrome due to heat	scorching of heat towards body fluid, causes fluid transformed into sticky condition which is phlegm
phlegmatic syndrome due to indigestion	indigestion is occurs due to the stagnation of food ingested fails to be transformed into nutrient essence but turns out to be phlegm
phlegmatic syndrome due to pathogenic wind	invasion of exogenous pathogenic wind, that stagnates flow of qi, leads to dysfunction of fluid metabolism, and resulting phlegm formation
phlegmatic syndrome over a long period of time	the phlegm that accumulated and stagnated in the body for a long period of time, due to all above reasons

## Phlegm Diseases in Modern Chinese Medicine

In modern time, physicians believe phlegm is a cause of various diseases. In clinical practice, phlegm can be categorized into two- visible phlegm and invisible phlegm (Liu, 2006). The phlegm syndromes can be identified by slimy tongue fur, heaviness in head and body, slippery pulse, cough with sputum, snoring, fullness and oppression in the chest and abdomen, and dizziness (Wu, 2017).

According to (Song, 2017), there are 91 types of diseases closely related with phlegmatic syndrome. Among all, 10.7% of them are related to coronary diseases. Other diseases include hyperlipidemia, hypertension, stroke, cerebrovascular disease, epilepsy, schizophrenia, headache, acute and chronic bronchitis, asthma, diabetes, polycystic ovarian syndrome, tumor, trigeminal nerve pain, Parkinson's syndrome, eczema and itchiness, dysmenorrhea, leukorrhea, oral ulceration and allergic rhinitis.

### Principles for Treatment

The treatment principle for dampness syndrome in <Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine> can be a reference for phlegmatic syndrome due to the high similarity between two syndromes. The ancient Chinese medicine text stated that to treat internal dampness, we need to use bitter taste herbs with heat nature, combine with the herbs with sour and mild taste. The herbs with bitter taste would dry the dampness, while herbs with mild taste would purge the dampness.

Prior to Jin-Yuan dynasty, phlegm diseases were mainly treated by emetic medicinal method, purgation method and warming method. These methods were useful to drain the dampness. However, Zhu Dan Xi believed that, excess usage of drainage method would lead to several side-effects. Thus, he emphasized on the treatment of the sunken and deficiency of spleen *qi* that caused the increase of phlegm generation. By that, he succeed in exterminate the diseases at the root.

Zhu Dan Xi suggested "Those who are excellent in treating phlegm disease, they always focus their treatments on smoothen the *qi* movement. Once the *qi* movement is smooth, body fluid circulation will be smooth." The statement indicates the importance of resolving phlegm by regulating *qi* (Zhu, 2006). His principles of medicine have been widely accepted and adopted today.

### Characteristics of Medicinal Herbs

As mentioned in < Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine >, herbs can be categorized according to their nature of *yin* and *yang*. Herbs with taste of acrid, sweet and mild are related to *yang*, while herbs with taste of sour, bitter and salty are related to *yin*. The flavours have their specific and unique functions in maintaining and restoring the function of *zang fu*, or organs. For example, herbs pertain to Yang are able to dredge, while herbs pertain to Yin are able to astringe.

The record on the usage of combination of nature of herbs according to the taste (or flavours) was found in <Yellow Emperor's Canon of Medicine>. By combining the herbs, the synergistic

and antagonistic effects of the herbs can be utilized to maximize the medicinal effects, and improve the curing effect in a more holistic way.

The combination of acrid and sweet herbs are able to generate *yang*, which is the main factor to improve *qi* circulation. With sufficiency of *yang qi*, the circulation of fluid in our body can be improved, thus the accumulation of phlegm in the body can be reduced.

Analysis on <Dan Xi Xin Fa> reveals that out of all the herbs used in treating phlegmatic diseases, 26 are bitter herbs, while 18 are acrid herbs, 13 sweet herbs, 5 sour herbs, 2 salty herbs, and 1 mild herb (Figure 1). The record on 24 prescriptions revealed that only 1 prescription that did not contain bitter herb and 1 without acrid herb. 15 of the prescriptions contained sweet herbs, 7 with sour herbs, 5 with salty herbs, and 1 prescription contained mild herbs. High frequency of using bitter and acrid herbs shows the good effect of these herbs in treating phlegmatic diseases.

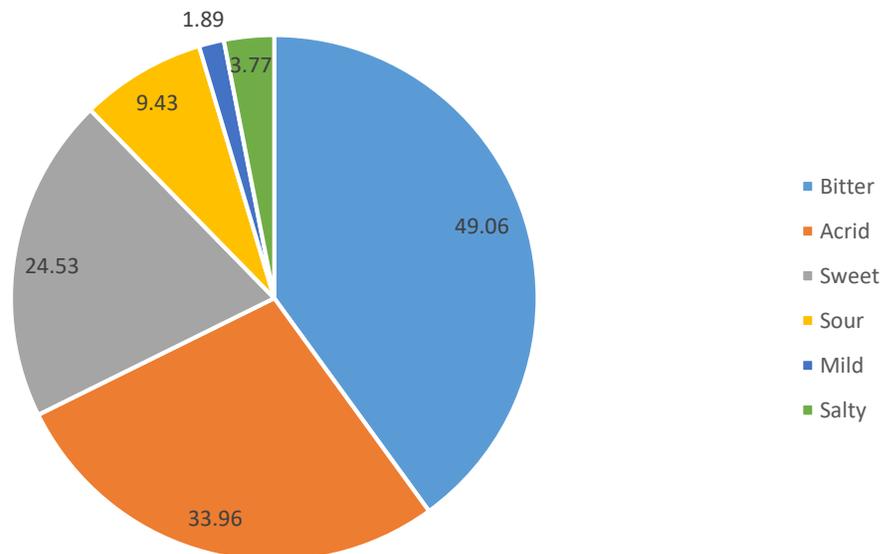


Figure 1. Analysis on herbs according to the taste

As the result shown, the highest frequency of herbs used in the prescriptions was the bitter herbs, followed by acrid and sweet herbs. The results showed Zhu Dan Xi did not select the herbs with functional approach in treating phlegmatic diseases. Instead, he made good use of the taste and the nature of herbs to regulate *qi* movement and fluid metabolism.

Acrid herbs is always related to *yang*, which can be used to circulate *qi*. Bitter herbs is always related to *yin*, which can be used to descend *qi* and purge pathogens. By combining the herbs with both tastes, *qi* can be regulated- ascend clear *qi* and descend turbid *qi* to reach *yin-yang* harmonization. The approach as mentioned by Zhu Dan Xi is different compared to the prior to Jin-Yuan dynasty, phlegm was usually dispelled through emetic medicinal method, purgation method, and warming method. In modern Chinese medicine, this principle is recommended in

treating phlegmatic diseases. Modification and personal selection can be applied as well for better medicinal effect.

### Conclusions

High frequency of bitter and acrid herbs have been used in treating phlegmatic diseases, follow by sweet, sour, salty, and mild herbs. Bitter and acrid herbs are related in *qi* regulation, body fluid metabolisms, and the purging of pathogens. The classification of herbs from the perspective of their tastes is easier than the classification from the perspective of their functions. The way of classification can be applied in TCM classes as well for better learning, as it is easier to be memorized.

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